United Nations E/CN.6/2000/NGO/13

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
19 January 2000

Original: English

Commission on the Status of Women
Forty-fourth session
28 February-2 March 2000
Item 3 of the provisional agenda*
Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women

Statement submitted by Soroptimist International, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status with the Economic and Social Council; and Project Concern International and the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, non-governmental organizations in special consultative status with the Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 26 July 1996.

* * *

Pregnancy and young adolescents

We, the above-mentioned non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council, urge Governments to provide more appropriate education and information resources about sexual and reproductive health for young women, and more appropriate support and services for pregnant adolescents.

Adolescent childbirth is a global issue. The Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) has established that at least half of all young people will have sex by the age of 16 and most will have had sex by the age of 20. Ten per cent of world births are to teenage mothers. And yet young pregnant adolescents are at risk or are disadvantaged in a number of ways that have been acknowledged and highlighted by the United Nations.

Young pregnant teenagers are more likely to experience health problems at childbirth that affect both mother and child; they are less likely to complete their education and they are less likely to be employed.

In most cases, young adolescents become pregnant because of lack of information, advice and preventative measures. Appropriate and adequate education and support would help to prevent young adolescent girls becoming pregnant. We urge all Governments to ensure that girls and young women are provided with appropriate advice, support and health services.

Even where available, contraceptive devices are often not used correctly, if at all. Teenage marriages are still common in many developing countries, with many girls marrying under the age of 15. Young married women are more likely to have children in quick succession and to start having children at a younger age. Cultural and traditional practices in many societies lead to early childbirth.

Appropriate reproductive and sexual health education and services are vital if girls and young women are going to develop their full potential and have the same opportunities and choices as boys and young men.

* E/CN.6/2000/1.

00-24975 (E) 040200

Health risks

The World Health Organization (WHO) states that the safest age for pregnancy is 20 to 24 years old. Early pregnancies can endanger young adolescents' health. Adolescents, particularly younger teenagers, are at risk because skeletal growth is incomplete in many women until the age of 18, while the birth canal may not mature until they reach 20 to 21 years. Deaths related to pregnancy and childbirth are two to five times higher among women under 18 than among those aged 20 to 29.

Unprotected sex not only leads to the possibility of pregnancy but also leads to the possibility of contracting sexually transmitted diseases or HIV.

Many teenage pregnancies are unwanted and there are 4.4 million abortions every year among adolescents, some of which are unsafe or illegal.

In many societies around the world, sexual assault is prevalent, with more and more young girls being abducted, raped and trafficked.

These are all facts which should be conveyed to young people from an early age.

Beijing critical areas of concern

The Beijing Platform for Action highlights a number of issues that affect the sexual development and activities of adolescents, which if addressed by Governments would ensure that adolescents make informed choices about their sexual activities.

Inequalities and inadequacies in and unequal access to education and training

In all societies, women with the least education start sexual relationships earlier than women with more schooling. In all countries, women with less than primary education are at least twice as likely to marry under the age of 20 than women with more schooling.

Education empowers young women to become decision makers and to make informed choices about their lives. Education programmes teach young people about the possible repercussions of their sexual activities. As future mothers themselves, young women are educators of the next generation. It is therefore even more important that young women are given an appropriate and sufficient education.

Sex education does not promote sexual promiscuity but provides correct information so that young people can make informed decisions. The option of abstinence from sexual relations until marriage can and should form part of sex education.

When adolescents become pregnant, they more often than not do not complete their education either because it is impractical or because their school excludes them.

Inequalities and inadequacies in and unequal access to health care and related services

There are still insufficient youth-friendly health services, particularly for adolescent females seeking advice about sexual and reproductive health. Teenage mothers often do not receive appropriate or adequate health care.

Inequality between men and women in the sharing of power and decision-making at all levels

The sexual activities of women are determined by men in many societies. Men often dominate a relationship sexually and emotionally. Young women are restricted in their activities and often receive less education. Young girls are encouraged to marry early even in communities where it is forbidden by law.

There are a disturbing number of teenage pregnancies resulting from sexual assault and forced sexual intercourse.

Non-governmental organizations and Governments need to ensure that the needs of girls and young women are identified by girls and young women themselves, and that their needs are addressed.

Actions

We recommend that Governments and non-governmental organizations:

- Support non-formal education for young people that provides programmes and support for the social, personal and sexual development of girls and young women;
- Provide youth-friendly health services for girls and young women;
- Make it illegal to exclude pregnant adolescents and adolescent mothers from school;

- Provide suitable and sufficient education programmes in schools on sexual and reproductive health;
- Promote gender equality through all educational programmes, especially through sexual and reproductive health education programmes.